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‘With Velvet Facings’: The Original London Robes

by Nicholas Groves

In his book on London academical dress, Philip Goff gives a glimpse of the University’s original scheme.¹ As he says, robes were not used at all, until an enquiry in 1843 caused Senate to discuss the matter. The enquiry came from a clergyman-graduate, the Revd F. Harrison Rankin, who obviously needed to have a hood to wear over his surplice; he wondered whether the University had hoods of its own or allowed the use of Oxford and Cambridge ones! Robes were authorized on 28 February 1844; their use was not compulsory.² The scheme was replaced by the current one around 1862 (to arrive at this date, many articles have been read and photographs examined). It is not known at present what precipitated the change of robes.³ The full scheme is given in a workbook belonging to Philip Goff, and it was originally used by Northams. The entry is headed ‘London: Old Style’, and so must be written after 1862, but presumably soon enough after for it to be needed for graduates who wished for the old-style hoods.

Gowns

Undergraduates: black; the sleeve pleated and buttoned; black velvet facings.

BA: as Cambridge BA [b2], faced black velvet.

MA: as Oxford MA [m1], with a crescent of black velvet over the armhole (points downwards), and with facings of black velvet, 4.5" wide at the top, increasing to 8" at the skirt, ‘divided in the middle’; i.e. it would appear as having two velvet stripes, set 1" apart.

The original version of this paper formed the basis of an address I gave at the Burgon Society meeting at Senate House on 30 April 2005. Its current form owes much to the subsequent discussion.

¹ *University of London Academic Dress* (London: University of London Press, 1999).

² It still is not; certainly as late as 1989 one could see the occasional graduate crossing the stage in street clothes.

³ I am grateful to Dr Alex Kerr, FBS, for pointing out that there was a change of Vice-Chancellor in 1862. The portrait of George Grote, who took office in that year, which hangs in the passage outside the Council Room in Senate House, shows him wearing the new-style LL.D hood over his vice-cancellarial robe, which suggests he may have had something to do with it.

LL.B: as MA, but the whole gown made in blue. The facings not divided.
LL.D: as MA, but the whole gown made in blue (with divided facings). The yoke also covered in blue velvet.
MB: as MA, but the whole gown made in violet. The facings not divided.
MD: as MA, but the whole gown made in violet (with divided facings). The yoke also covered in violet velvet.

Hoods

BA: black silk, faced 3" black velvet.
MA: black silk, lined lavender silk, faced inside the cowl with 2 x 3" bands of lavender velvet, set 1" apart.
LL.B: blue silk, faced 3" blue velvet.
LL.D: blue cloth lined blue silk, faced inside the cowl with 2 x 3" bands of blue velvet, set 1" apart.
MB: violet silk, faced 3" violet velvet.
MD: violet cloth lined violet silk, faced inside the cowl with 2 x 3" bands of violet velvet, set 1" apart.

Caps

Undergraduate and BA: black cloth, bound black velvet; a black silk tassel with a black velvet button.
MA: as BA, but all in black velvet.
LL.B: as BA, but all in blue.
LL.D: as LL.B, but bound black velvet and crimson silk.
MB: as BA, but with a violet velvet button.
MD: as BA, but all in violet.

Goff also gives a previous scheme in his book, on page 28. It has some differences from the above: the undergraduates wear the St John's College, Cambridge, gown (not Pembroke, as above); the gown for all degrees other than BA is the Cambridge (not Oxford) MA gown, in black with black velvet facings;⁴ a black cap is used for all—cloth for undergraduates and bachelors, velvet for MA and doctors. One is led to wonder if this version is the original scheme, and the one in the Northam's book is a later refinement.

A number of features stand out. The principal one is the use of velvet on the gowns and hoods. This in itself is a high-status material—it takes a significantly greater amount of silk to make a piece of velvet than to make a correspondingly

⁴ I do in fact wonder if 'Oxford' is a mistake in Northam's book, given the Cambridge basis of the rest of the scheme.

large piece of plain weave, and is thus more costly.⁵ Also, at about this time the Cambridge colleges were moving away from the old sleeveless ‘curtain’ gown for their undergraduates (similar to the Oxford commoner’s gown) to the sleeved gown based on the BA, many of which were trimmed with velvet: the first of these was the Corpus Christi gown, which has black velvet facings.⁶

The use of distinctive faculty colours is itself also a new feature: in the 1840s, neither Oxford nor Cambridge were distinguishing between medical and legal graduates in this manner; I have not been able to discover the date of introduction of these degrees at Durham, but again, the differencing is not done by discrete colours as here. (London did not gain Divinity degrees until 1900.) It will be noted that those for Laws and Medicine, blue and violet, were retained into the new scheme.

The use of coloured gowns is a novel feature—the MB’s violet gown is still used by the MS (although in a different shape); the LL.B’s blue gown, oddly, migrated to the BMus when that degree was introduced (again, in a different shape). The current BA gown [b4] seems to be derived from the original undergraduate gown. The use of single colour hoods is notable, too, as is the use of coloured caps.

Why the BA should be given what is effectively a BD hood is interesting: at this time, all BAs (Oxford, Cambridge, Dublin, Durham) wore black and fur. Why did London eschew the use of fur? In 1843, it was hardly because of environmental/animal rights concerns! I have suggested in my work on Lampeter (who did give their BA a black and fur hood in 1865) that the black and fur BA hood was seen as an ‘ecclesiastical’ garment, and the stridently secular London wished to dissociate itself from it. It is notable that no fur was used on bachelors’ hoods after London (with the exception of the Lampeter BA) until Liverpool did so in 1903—and that may well be an influence from Edinburgh. As Philip Lowe has demonstrated, Victoria (chartered 1880, robes 1881) started without fur on the bachelors’ hoods, and added it in 1901.⁷

The original MA hood was lined with lavender. It is very close to that used at Durham—and also the *alumnus* hoods of several theological colleges. Mauve is known to be the ‘latest thing’ in dyeing technology of the mid-nineteenth century, and this may well be why it was chosen both here and at Durham.

A table in *Notes and Queries* for 1858, compiled by J. W. G. Gutch (reproduced in my book on Lampeter robes)⁸ includes music degrees, and assigned hoods for

⁵ I am grateful to Susan North, FBS, for this observation.

⁶ See A. G. Almond, *Gowns and Gossip* (Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1925)..

⁷ *Manchester Academic Dress: The Origins and Development of Academical Dress at the Victoria University of Manchester, 1880 to the Present Day* (Manchester: John Rylands Library, 2002) p. 8.

⁸ *The Academical Robes of Saint David's College Lampeter (1822-1971)* (Lampeter: University of Wales, Lampeter, 2001). p. 24.

the London BMus and DMus. These followed the pattern for the MB and MD, but in puce silk and velvet. ('Puce', as I have demonstrated in the case of the Lampeter BD,⁹ is in fact a dark violet shade, so Gutch may be reading too much into his sources.) They are not, as will be seen above, in the Northam's scheme, and indeed London did not award these degrees until 1877, when the Faculty of Music was set up, so where he got this information from is unclear.¹⁰

When giving this paper, I made some drawings of the robes, and when doing so, I was stuck as to what shape to use for the hoods, as this is nowhere specified. Given that the London scheme was basing itself on Cambridge, and given that Cambridge was (or at least had been) using the full shape with rounded corners, and also that this was the shape used by London tailors for Cambridge hoods anyway, I decided that this must be shape to use.

Lampeter preserves examples of its old hoods, and it would be good if the Burgon Society could have examples of these old London robes made up for our Archive, as they represent probably the first examples of 'designed' degree robes, as opposed to the adaptations of the Oxbridge system made by Dublin and Durham.

Further reading

- Goff, P., *University of London Academic Dress* (London: University of London Press, 1999).
- Groves, N., *The Academical Robes of Saint David's College Lampeter (1822-1971)* (Lampeter: University of Wales, Lampeter, 2001).
- Groves, N., *Theological Colleges: Their Hoods and Histories* (London, Burgon Society, 2004).
- Lowe, P: *Manchester Academic Dress: The Origins and Development of Academical Dress at the Victoria University of Manchester, 1880 to the Present Day* (Manchester: John Rylands Library, 2002).

⁹ *The Academical Robes . . .*, p. 11.

¹⁰ And of course the musicians were then awarded the blue hoods with white linings.